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Some Thoughts About Togetherness: an introduction

Réflexions sur «Togetherness»

Algunos Pensamientos Sobre el “Sentimiento de Unión”

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ABSTRACT *There is a growing acknowledgement of the importance of the social interactive dimension of learning. In this article we argue that the cognitive theories of learning cannot give a full description of all the aspects of joint learning. The dimension of ‘togetherness’ is here proposed as a descriptor of the aspect of involvement of the individual in a group’s activity. We try to develop a working definition of togetherness on a theoretical basis. We also explore some of the processes in early childhood that may have relevance for a further understanding of how children learn to maintain this togetherness in their group activities. It is argued furthermore that the relevance of fostering this kind of strategy for togetherness in early childhood may be seen as a preparation of children to take part in collaborative learning processes in their later life.*

RÉSUMÉ *On assiste à une reconnaissance croissante de l’importance de la dimension d’interaction sociale de l’apprentissage. Dans cet article, nous avançons que les théories cognitives de l’apprentissage ne peuvent pas donner une description complète de tous les aspects de l’apprentissage conjoint. La dimension de «togetherness» est proposée ici pour décrire l’aspect de participation de l’individu à l’activité d’un groupe. Nous essayons de développer une définition ad hoc de «togetherness» sur une base théorique. Nous examinons également certains processus de la première enfance qui peuvent s’appliquer à une meilleure compréhension de la manière dont les enfants apprennent à entretenir cette «togetherness» dans les activités de groupe. On avance en outre que la pertinence d’encourager ces types de stratégies de «togetherness» dans la petite enfance peut être considérée comme une préparation des enfants à prendre part plus tard à des processus d’apprentissage collaboratif.*

RESUMEN *Existe un mayor conocimiento de la importancia de la dimensión interactiva social del aprendizaje. En este artículo indicamos que las teorías cognoscitivas de aprendizaje no pueden dar una descripción completa de todos los aspectos del aprendizaje conjunto. Aquí se propone la dimensión de “sentimiento de unión” como un descriptor del aspecto de participación del individuo en una actividad de grupo. Nosotros intentamos desarrollar una*

definición práctica de sentimiento de unión en una base teórica. También exploramos algunos procesos de la infancia que puedan tener relevancia para un mayor entendimiento de cómo los menores aprenden a mantener este sentimiento de unión en sus actividades de grupos. También se dice que la significación de acogimiento familiar de este tipo de estrategias en busca de unión en la primera infancia puede verse como una preparación de los niños para que tomen parte en procesos de aprendizaje conjuntos más tarde en la vida.

Living Apart Together?

In *The Cement Garden* the novelist Ian McEwan describes a horrifying story of four children of one family who had lost their parents, one after the other. There were no arrangements made for these children (pre- and early adolescent) in case the parents died, so the children were on their own. In their fear that they would be placed in separate residential houses they decided to keep the death of their mother (the longest living of the parents) a secret and to bury her themselves. The children obviously felt a strong urge to stay together, despite the emotional and personal problems that they sometimes had, despite their quarrels, incompatibilities and disagreements.

In his novel McEwan obviously touches on an interesting point. There seems to be a strong tendency in human life to form groups and to maintain groups for a certain time, sometimes despite heavy conflicts and disagreements. This complex tendency of forming and maintaining a group we will call here 'togetherness' (see Hännikäinen, 1998, 1999). At the personal level this togetherness is always linked to affective feelings or a feeling of belongingness to a group and to the feeling that one wants to remain a member of this group. These feelings at the personal level make such groups different from mere collections of people that are together without 'togetherness', like people squeezed in an elevator, drivers in a traffic jam and (sometimes) children in a classroom. Just physically being together does not always imply 'togetherness'. On the other hand, sometimes people are not physically in one place but still have the feeling that they do somehow belong together, for whatever reason. Living apart together, a LAT relationship, as a recent variant of the matrimonial status is a clear example of this. LAT relationships actually stress the importance of togetherness for some people not living a substantially shared life.

It is clear from these examples that 'togetherness' is often considered important for humans, although the reasons or causes behind the creation of this condition may be different and not always clear. It is easy to suppose that in some cases there are profit expectations behind it, but such expectations are certainly not always the main drive for togetherness. The tendency towards togetherness sometimes seems to be a social emotional value, with a strong ethical dimension in it, as in saying that humans share the world and thus, for instance, should live harmoniously together and use the world together. We are not implying here that this tendency is 'natural' or inborn for human beings nor that it is caused by cultural transmission. Evidently, some people manifest signs of togetherness in behaviour or words, but it is also a fact that some animals demonstrate a very strong tendency to stay together. The reasons are not very clear.

In education pupils are put together in one classroom and the idea is gaining strength that this is more than just an economical coincidence. With strengthening of the insight that pupils learn better cooperatively, in the sense of developing a deeper understanding, and with the epistemological point of view that human knowledge is a co-constructed product of human activity, the arguments for the relevance of togetherness are becoming stronger. Of course, this might be a calculating kind of togetherness (togetherness as long as it yields good profits) or

a togetherness as in a LAT relationship. Nevertheless, people in these situations show signs of an awareness that they belong together and want to stay together for the time being.

We think it is important to study the phenomenon of togetherness further in an educational context and try to get a better understanding of togetherness and its educational value, as well as of the conditions under which it develops. This special issue brings together different articles of authors from different countries that may shed some light on the phenomenon of togetherness. It stands to reason, though, that the articles do not form a systematic examination of togetherness, due to the fact that the notion is not yet strictly defined. The articles are put together on the basis of their common values with regard to the relevance of the social dimension in human learning and development and their shared recognition that people do feel an urge to act together, create together, plan together or simply be together.

In this first article we will try to collect some further arguments to demonstrate the relevance of togetherness, as well as set out some lines to gain a deeper understanding of it.

The Social and Affective Dimension of Cognitive Learning

In so far as the cognitive theories imply social, motivational or emotional aspects in their conceptions of learning (see for example Bruer, 1993), these factors seem to function at their best as conditions for cognitive learning. In their analyses and categorisation of cognitive, affective and regulative learning activities Vermunt and Verloop (1999, p. 261), for example, indicate that '[These] affective learning activities, which students employ to cope with emotions that arise during learning lead to a mood that may foster or impair the progress of the learning process'. The authors emphasise the importance of 'affective learning', which is related to *'dealing with emotions'*. As more concrete manifestations of this category in learning Vermunt and Verloop (1999, p. 262) mention 'talking to oneself in a reassuring way, avoiding stress, and setting realistic learning goals'.

It is obvious that Vermunt and Verloop from their cognitivistic perspective consider learning only in an individualised, intra-personal way, not giving due attention to emotions and affections which are involved in collaborative learning or learning in communities of practice. We believe, however, that more serious attention must be given to the affective aspect of collaborative learning activities. Among other things this leads to questions about the meaning and the prerequisites of togetherness. How does a learners' community deal with such emotions? How is the creation and maintenance of 'intersubjectivity', the mutual understanding that is achieved between people in communication (see Rogoff, 1990, p. 67), possible? What is required to keep collaborative learning going?

In cognitive theories of learning the motivational, affective or emotional aspects of learning tend to be defined strictly as individual qualities that do not explain why and how these individual qualities can or may contribute to the group's tendency to stay together as a community of learning individuals. At its best these personal qualities function as conditions for the individual's learning, which may interact with the social condition linked to the collaborative setting.

In the course of our argument we will try to develop a preliminary working definition for the notion of 'togetherness'. Although the notion may seem rather elusive at the beginning, we believe that a further exploration of the bases, conditions and constraints of personal involvement in a social activity might contribute to a further understanding of the social affective dimension of learning processes based on collaboration. Moreover, if we assume that the call for more collaborative learning in school and work situations will become stronger, it may be important to foster strategies for dealing with togetherness in group activities at an early age. For this reason both the present article and the following articles in this special issue

take the younger children, aged two to eight, as the object of study. As none of the articles can present a fully developed theory of togetherness, we are merely gathering the pieces of a puzzle that might in due time detail and articulate the general notion we have in our minds.

Theoretical Stepping Stones

The work of Vygotsky and colleagues has certainly played an important role in the recognition of the importance of the affective and social interactive dimensions of learning and development. For Vygotsky learning was essentially a process of inventing or appropriating new cultural tools and this process takes place as an inter-personal interaction. His frequently quoted statement of the genetic law of development (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 163) expresses exactly this point of view by saying that every psychological function develops at two levels: first on the inter-personal level, in the context of activity based on interactions of children with others, and afterwards these socially embedded actions and meanings become interiorised and become functions on an intra-personal, mental level. For Vygotsky and his followers the social interactive dimension of the learning process never really disappears. Even on an intra-personal, mental level the meanings remain essentially socio-cultural in nature. Human consciousness is a socio-cultural and historically developing quality. Therefore, for Vygotsky the dimension of acting together in the context of socio-cultural activities is the basis for all learning. In this context of socio-cultural activities the child obtains assistance in appropriating new tools (and their associated actions); in these activities a zone of proximal development is constantly created. Although Vygotsky does not use the word 'togetherness', the implicit notion belongs to the core of his theory (see Goldstein, 1999, who called this the 'interrelational dimension' of the zone of proximal development).

Given this starting point, it is no surprise that Vygotsky also paid attention to the question of what creates the attachment of a person to socio-cultural activities. According to Vygotsky it is silly to separate human action from the affect or emotional involvement of the person in his or her actions (see Wertsch, 1985, p. 189). Later Leont'ev elaborated these notions in his theory of activity. He distinguishes *cultural meaning* of an action, referring to the generalised cultural meaning that is attached to a certain action in a given community, and *personal sense*, referring to the relevance a person attaches to that action in the light of his or her actual motives. Personal sense differs from cultural meaning: where cultural meaning refers to the 'what and how' of cultural symbols (e.g. what is a square root? how do you find it?), the personal sense refers to the 'why' (why is the square root important for me now?). So the personal sense is more directly related to the affective and motivational engagement of an actor with his actions or with other elements in the situation for acting. For Vygotsky both elements are always involved in human activity. Therefore, he writes that a thought can never by itself produce another thought. It is the motive that produces a thought in the first place, which can be elaborated later by intellectual processes. Thought (intellect) and affect are inseparably related, like meaning and sense. It is exactly in this unity that Vygotsky looks for explanations of a person's continuation of activities: it is the affective and personally meaningful solidarity of a person with his/her activity or situation that motivates continued involvement in these activities.

It is plausible from this that Vygotsky's and Leont'ev's explanation of togetherness, had they ever tried to deal directly with this notion, would be in terms of affective involvement of an individual in a group's activity. In other words, it is the personal sense (or affective value) that a person attaches to a social activity which forms the basis for the tendency to togetherness. Togetherness, then, is one of the kinds of binding a person develops with an activity. As personal sense is strongly associated with the motive for an activity, we may

conclude, on a theoretical basis, that sharing of the basic motive behind a social activity is one of the fundamental conditions of togetherness.

So why do we think this is important? Recent elaborations of Vygotsky's theory (see for example Rogoff *et al.*, 1996; Wells, 1999) stress the importance of collaborative learning. Collaborative learning as a process of constructing new knowledge is not a process of complementary learning in which different pieces are put together by different actors in order to make a new whole. Collaboration requires reflection on one's own understandings and comparing understandings among participants in a discourse. Consequently, collaborative learning calls for revisions of all the knowledge pooled in the discursive process and, as such, by necessity arouses conflicts and misunderstandings. The main reason why discourses in collaborative learning processes ever lead to improved understandings is that the participants in the process are willing to share their understandings and keep on doing so *despite* their disagreements and conflicts. Bakhtin (see Wertsch, 1990) so aptly characterised such discursive processes in collaborative learning with terms like multivoicedness and polyphony (see also Carpay & van Oers, 1999). But the fact that they can ever be productive at all relies on the fact that the participants in this process, for the time being, feel obliged to each other, stay with each other and maintain togetherness.

If indeed collaborative learning in this sense is the future of learning at school, it is important to determine the conditions for transforming a class collective into a learning community that is based on togetherness. Let us then first try to bring together some of the hypotheses that can be found in the literature as to what togetherness may be and how it is maintained.

How to Conceive of 'Togetherness'?

As we have discussed togetherness thus far it is clear that we do not conceive of it in terms of physical closeness. In fact, we conceive of togetherness as a quality of an activity that describes the fact that an activity does not break down when problems have to be faced and when conflicts have to be settled in the context of that activity. Instead, the participants in that activity demonstrate an implicit or explicit wish to continue their shared activity.

In this interpretation togetherness may be seen as something that comes close to 'friendship'. There are indeed close connections between togetherness and friendship, but we maintain that togetherness is not just a new word for friendship. As friendship is mostly used as a special kind of rather stable, dyadic relationship between children of a similar developmental level or with similar interests, togetherness is broader in the sense that it also includes forms of mutual relatedness in other settings, like a family or club. Supporters of a club may feel and express some kind of togetherness without being friends; friends on the other hand may split up for a while when they have a strong disagreement, while togetherness manifests itself in the fact that the partners stay together at that moment, despite their disagreement at that time. Of course, the troubled friendship may recover from this momentary break, and here we see that friendship often includes some kind of togetherness as well. Interestingly, this togetherness may even evolve in the context of a friendship, as Avgitidou demonstrates in this issue. Friendship can be a context for the development of pro-social behaviour and, as such, contribute to a strengthening of the togetherness between friends. It is interesting to note here that the children in Avgitidou's study sometimes refer to their friendship to explain their pro-social behaviour. It looks as if friendship is a framework for them, which children can conform to as a strategy to maintain and reinforce togetherness with their friends.

From the perspective of togetherness as a quality of a social activity that shows itself in a continuation of the activity despite problems, conflicts or other unfavourable conditions, the

authors of the present article conducted a collaborative study of a classroom activity in which a teacher and four 6-year-old children were involved in the collaborative activity of composing a story together on the basis of a couple of coloured pictures shown by the teacher. The children had volunteered for this activity and were used to working in small groups with their teacher. The nature of this activity is prone to rouse disagreements and conflicts, so we could expect that some demands on the pupils would arise with respect to their togetherness. The aim of the study was to find out what kind of manifestations of togetherness could be found in this situation and what kind of strategies the children would employ to maintain togetherness.

A qualitative analysis of this collaborative activity demonstrated ways of maintaining togetherness by young children and their teacher, which we classified with the help of a theoretical framework drawn from the work of Hicks (1996). This framework is based on the assumption that human activity is a multi-layered process that encompasses four different levels (Hicks, 1996, p. 113).

1. The level of the shared contexts of meaning which constitute a social activity in a given classroom setting, which we call the *sociogenetic level*. A human activity can be understood as a reaction to a pre-existent cultural structure or institution. In our case children were used to the school's policy of working in groups and solving problems together. The most remarkable demonstration of this was the general tendency of the group to produce one consensual story. Another example of togetherness resulting from children's response to structures or conventions at the socio-genetic level can be seen in the children's persistence: even when children got tired during the session, they *wanted* to stay together. They probably felt obliged to abide by the rules of school life. It is not too far fetched to suppose that the children engaged in a circle time situation (see Hännikäinen, this issue) are also responding to the socio-genetic, structural requirements of this 'institution' and want to stay together on the basis of their awareness of this. Similarly, as Sanchez *et al.* show, the way children deal with the maintenance of their joint activity may be a result of how they deal with elements from their surrounding adult culture. On the basis of these latter observations we might even hypothesise that the tendency to maintain togetherness may be due to cultural factors.
2. The level of the enactment of the meaning construction within a particular activity setting in the classroom, which we call the *discourse genetic level*. In the case of our story composing activity children refer back to previous agreements in order to find consensus in a conflict about continuation of the story. The wish to be consistent with regard to previous decisions is apparently a strong argument for members of a group to keep others allied and 'within' the story. However, it is not only content-related arguments that are working here. The conversations and negotiations of the children with regard to story composition actually created a very strong feeling of togetherness in the children, which was explicitly expressed by their repeated utterance: 'We are the authors of this book!'. Similar observations can be read in Janson's contribution to this special issue.
3. The level of the changes in the individual participant's meaning (re)constructions over time, which we call the *ontogenetic level*. In our story composing study we could not find examples of ways of maintaining togetherness that could be directly related to the children's level of development, as we videotaped the children's activity at just one moment in time. Suggestive examples of this process can, however, be found in the articles of Rayna and Hännikäinen. Rayna, for example presents observations of very young children that communicate their proximity of interest in their actions and interactions: manipulating concrete objects and seeking emotional contact are basic drives for these children (given their ontogenetic level of development). By demonstrating these

interests the children probably feel their sameness and demonstrate their wish to stay together. Indeed, it is shaky to make sweeping interpretations of the behaviour of a very young girl that tried to ease a crying child (see Rayna, this issue). Nevertheless, the obvious effect of this behaviour is the fact that the group's togetherness is confirmed, both for the children and for the adults (it is not impossible that the girl actually wanted to please the adult, but even then it is a demonstration of her attempt to confirm the relationship with the adult and thus to demonstrate her need for togetherness).

Similarly interesting in this respect is the investigation of Hännikäinen. The children's initiatives to build an element of play into their 'work' is probably a consequence of their developmental state (which could be characterised as being at the stage of play as a leading activity; cf. El'konin, 1972). By showing this developmental motive the children demonstrate their sameness and create optimal conditions for togetherness. It is probably the play element in the children's work that constitutes a strong factor for these children to keep on working together.

Though more systematic observations are required for reliable confirmations of these hypothetical interpretations, we assume that proximity of motives and interests, as resulting from a certain developmental stage, can be strong elements in the promotion and maintenance of togetherness.

4. The level of the contributions of each individual participant to the flow of the shared activity, which we call the *microgenetic level*. Sometimes the actions actually carried out produce the reasons for (maintenance of) togetherness. This is particularly the case when involvement with a special object or action becomes articulated. In our story composing study an example of this could be witnessed in a boy who already appeared to be tired after the first 10 minutes. Nevertheless, he again became engaged when his idea could be included at a significant turn in the story. This roused the boy's interest and he was again with the others: togetherness is sometimes dependent on the details of the ongoing actions and how they appeal to the participants in the activity. Janson's article is particularly interesting in this respect, because it shows many microgenetic conditions that might be at work in rousing or blocking the emergence of togetherness. His work demonstrates that diversity among participants is an especially important factor that has to be dealt with carefully. According to Janson, however, it is not the individual differences *per se* (like, for example, blindness) that might work as an impediment to the emergence or continuation of togetherness, but the resulting difference in access to aspects of the situation (the physical, the social and the symbolic). Hence, the emergence or disappearance of togetherness is most probably a result of processes occurring at the microgenetic level in the context of activities (e.g. having to do with interpretations of the context, the actions to be performed, the use of tools and the conception of goals). Children's ways of dealing with these elements can sometimes be seen as a strategy of arousing or maintaining togetherness.

Another interesting phenomenon with regard to the construction or maintenance of togetherness at the microgenetic level was the language used by the participants. In our own study the use of particular 'naughty' or joking language was very effective in creating the group's common spirit of working together on a shared story. This kind of 'naughtiness', although started by one child, became collective. The same phenomenon could be observed in the studies of Hännikäinen and of de Haan and Singer. The study of de Haan and Singer extensively supports the idea that the language used by members of a group is a very strong element in creating a feeling of togetherness or reinforcing that feeling. It seems that the language people use is a very strong determinant of group formation and confirmation of a group's togetherness.

Closing Remarks

There are several good reasons for paying attention to the phenomenon of togetherness, elusive as it may sometimes seem. It is clear that much research is still needed to upgrade the concept into a clear definition or operationalisation. It is obvious that children often show this tendency to create some form of togetherness. In fact, the very existence of such a phenomenon as 'child culture' can be seen as a manifestation of this propensity. As far as evidence shows right now, there is probably no uniform way to create or maintain togetherness. Many different strategies can be used for the same purpose of creating or maintaining togetherness, depending on the developmental level of the actors, the situation at hand and the personal interests of the participants in an activity. We hope that our preliminary thoughts on togetherness and the hypotheses we have suggested will challenge the reader to pick up the idea critically. The following articles in this special issue of the *International Journal of Early Years Education* might give a lively impression of the different faces of togetherness and above all the different ways in which many authors from different countries are trying to understand basic processes in the development and education of children and to contribute to their actual and future learning.

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